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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 92 JULY 30TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

I have had a letter from one of our members holding an important position in the Presbyterian Church of Wales who is troubled about the attitude which Christians ought to adopt to Jews. He dislikes as a Christian the feeling which he finds growing against the Jews but fears that there is some occasion for it. He urges that we should have a Supplement on the subject, and I hope to arrange for this before very long. In the meantime, I showed the letter to one of our members who has a wide and varied knowledge of English society and who commented on it as follows:

ANTI-JEWISH FEELING

"Many Jews are unpleasant people, and so are many Christians. Alas, the acquisitive spirit is no racial monopoly. It may be found among urban landlords, among groups of householders who refuse the use of London Squares to dusty office workers, among the East Prussian landowners whose greed helped to bring down the Brüning Government, and among our own 'hard-faced men' of 1918 'who looked as if they had done very well out of the war.' One could run on. All the same, Jews *qua* Jews, can be exceedingly irritating. For centuries they have been persecuted in various parts of the world, and for every saint that persecution generates, it generates a thousand sufferers from an inferiority complex, whose reaction to the world around them is a heightened self-assertiveness. There is indeed a kind of pushfulness which the world at large regards as a Jewish characteristic. It is true, also, that the lower elements among them specialise in a type of petty fraud which flourishes in the world of small-scale business enterprise to which, partly for historical reasons, many Jews have gravitated. Among my own memories of a busy provincial police court, I can recall the frequency with which Jewish names recurred on days when we dealt with offences against the factory acts, embezzlement of material, and fraudulent business transactions of all kinds. On the other hand, I can recall the equally striking infrequency of their appearance on days when we dealt with cases involving cruelty to children, wife-beating, assault, and all types of domestic infidelity. It is a matter of taste, but personally I dislike crimes involving cruelty more than I dislike crimes involving greed. And that brings me to the positive aspect of my answer: Jews, in so far as one can generalise about them, have a peculiarly strong sense of family responsibility, of the significance of the home, and of the dignity of parenthood. Sir Robert Vansittart (I quote from memory) has described Hitler as a dangerous man because a rootless man: a man without 'pride of ancestry or hope of posterity.' It is their 'pride of ancestry and hope of posterity' expressed through this reverence for family relationships, that makes the Jews a potentially civilising and stabilising element in any community which has the self-restraint and wisdom to control its immediate reactions of personal irritation, and create a social and economic environment which calls for less exercise of acquisitive pushfulness. And, come to think of it, what pride of ancestry the Jews can set against their demoralising intervening centuries of persecution. Christianity itself is the achievement of their pioneer spiritual pilgrimage. The phrases of their prophets and poets are woven into our language and our literature. Their ancestors were debating the philosophy of history with archangels when ours were still painting themselves in primeval forests."

THE CHURCH AND PEACE AIMS

Dr. William Paton has developed the line of thought of the Supplement which he contributed to the News-Letter (C.N-L. No. 68) and included it in the wider setting of a book entitled *The Church and the New Order*.[1] He has had opportunities of consulting leading students of international affairs in this country and is in close touch with current Christian thought in America and on the European Continent. There could hardly be a better introduction and guide to the central questions which concern the Church in the international sphere. The important matter is not whether Dr. Paton is right in all his conclusions but the fact that he focusses attention on the crucial issues. The book can be recommended to those who are planning study circles for the coming winter.

RECONSTRUCTION—BEGINNING WITH THE CHURCH

It is a sign of health that a powerful body of clergy and laity in the Church of England have recognised that the moral authority of the Church in social affairs is impaired by the continued toleration of serious abuses in the administration of the Church itself, and that reform is essential. The publication of the small volume entitled *Putting our House in Order*[2] is an important event, not only on account of its frank facing of the task of the Church to-day and of the anomalies which stand in the way of its fulfilment, but because it is commended by the signatures of over a hundred and twenty well-known clergy and laity, including more than thirty bishops, who pledge themselves to the support of drastic reforms. A debt of gratitude is due to the Bishop of Sheffield for the courage, perseverance and statesmanship with which he has brought the movement for reform, in which he has been the prime mover, to its present stage.

THE SUPPLEMENT

An issue of the most far-reaching practical importance is raised in this week's Supplement. Its challenge cannot be taken too seriously. The writer is a civil servant who has worked for several years in an industrial district in the Midlands.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

[1] Student Christian Movement Press, 6s.

[2] Longmans, Green and Co., 3s. 6d.

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Supplement to
C.N.-L. No. 92

ECUMENICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORKING CLASSES

By W. G. Symons

(By Ecumenical Christianity is meant the movement in the present century towards unity and closer co-operation between Christian Churches throughout the world, which has found expression in the International Missionary Council, the World Conference on Faith and Order, the Universal Christian Council on Life and Work and the steps towards the formation of a World Council of the Churches, and in the international conferences at Edinburgh (1910), *Stockholm* (1925), *Lausanne* (1927), *Oxford* (1937), *Edinburgh* (1937), *Madras* (1938) *and Amsterdam* (1938).)

Wars have in the past provided an occasion for soldiers to see something of foreign lands. The present war is causing some to discover " foreign lands " within our own frontiers. In a recent Christian News-Letter (No. 74) there is an extract from a letter written by a " student in arms " on being stationed in the industrial north. The letter is revealing, as it shows how one section of our population does not know the very physical features among which the others live. It is revealing in another way too, for it is typically a " traveller's tale." It reads like the account of an explorer visiting a strange tribe; and, unavoidably, it recounts the outward forms while missing the inward substance. It portrays the industrial north, or at least the part in which the writer was stationed, as a scene of unrelieved squalor, meanness and desolation. The external facts are in the main true. That is just how large parts of the industrial north impress the newcomer. Yet such an account misses entirely the native culture of our older industrial districts which makes them the scene of a far saner and sounder social life than, say, the garden suburbs of London.

The readers of the Christian News-Letter, for all its large circulation, are not spread evenly throughout the population. Very few indeed are to be found among the industrial workers. And this is typical of the whole " ecumenical movement " of which the News-Letter is a manifestation. Yet an ecumenical Christianity which has no intellectual traffic with ordinary folk is doomed to sterility. It is tactically powerless, it is ethically enfeebled and it is missing the peculiar contribution of British religious history.

TACTICS

Leaving out of account for the moment the question of the relative desirability of authoritarian and democratic regimes, we must face the simple, practical fact that, whatever distinctive rôle the intellectual may have to play in the social changes of the present and future, the decisive part must be played by the common man. If the intellectual lives and thinks out of touch with ordinary folk his contribution will be possibly mischievous, or, more probably, insignificant. The ruling groups in the modern authoritarian regimes may manipulate and misuse the feelings and desires of the masses, but they are certainly not out of touch with them. An authoritarian regime ruled by an *élite* separate from the masses is, to-day, almost inconceivable, and, even if it were possible, the thought of such a regime being maintained and enforced by the type of intellectual who has access to the pages of the Christian News-Letter is too wildly fantastic to be considered. The tactical conclusion is inescapable. It is not enough for anyone who desires to influence affairs to know about the physical conditions and needs of working folk; he must have contact with their concerns, ideas and culture. If the course of history is to be influenced by an hairsbreadth, the ideas with which he is concerned must penetrate among, and be grasped by, ordinary folk.

MORAL FACTORS

I have purposely put the case in an extreme form: *even* in an authoritarian society the ruling group cannot afford to be remote from the masses—in the type of society which

many Christians see as morally desirable such a separation would be even more disastrous. To command their moral allegiance, the society of the future must incorporate some of those insights which we associate with the words "democracy" and "liberty." Leadership must be *responsible* leadership, sensitive to the needs, wills and desires of ordinary folk. And the common man must be free to participate consciously in the shaping of events. If we believe that, then we are seeking moral ends which can only be achieved in association with ordinary working folk.

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

The Christian News-Letter is concerned with the impact of the Christian religion on the ordering of social life, and in this, as in other matters, practical experience is worth much theory. The Christian faith has only rarely entered into conscious and organic relations with society. One such occasion was medieval Christendom; we often fail to realise that we have another example at our very doors, in the "working-class institutions" of our land.

This statement calls for explanation. During the last 200 years, there have grown up in our industrial towns a whole structure of working-class institutions and activities—if structure is the right term for a growth so loosely knit, spontaneous and lacking in outward uniformity. Some of the parts of this structure are known to us all, notably the trade unions and political "Labour." Others are less in the public eye—the great trading and productive institutions of the co-operative movement; the organs of adult education, gathered round the W.E.A. and the co-operative educational bodies; the friendly societies, orchestral and choral societies and hosts of other clubs and societies of working men. On their educational and political sides, these institutions have had some help from academic and Church leaders. But the more practical organisations—the trade unions and co-operative societies—have been the unaided creation of working folk. This fact seriously hinders intellectuals from forming a true appreciation of the experience contained in them—for that experience is to be found, not in books and theories, but in the lives of ordinary working men and in the institutions which they have created.

One of the most distinctive facts about British working-class life has been its roots in nonconformist Christianity. The following quotations are taken from Beatrice Webb's account (in *My Apprenticeship*) of life in one of the Lancashire cotton towns at the end of the last century. The account is all the more striking when we remember that the writer was not a professing Christian.

"It is the only society I have ever lived in, in which religious faith really guides thought and action, and forms a basis to the whole life of the individual and the community. I felt as if I were living through a page of Puritan history, . . . human beings governed by one idea; devotion to Christ with no struggle or thought about the world; in every action of their daily life living unto God. Living with these people has given me an insight into higher working class life—with all its charm of direct thinking, honest work and warm feeling; and, above all, taught me the real part played by religion in making the English people, and of dissent in teaching them the art of self-government, or rather serving as a means to develop their capacity for it. In this community all social life depends on the chapel and the co-op."

These are words from the past and yet they are not wholly of the past; they portray the concrete fact of working-class life and culture as, in a measure, it still exists in a multitude of industrial townships throughout the land. This is something which, in spite of its weaknesses and shortcomings, is of profound social and religious significance. And yet present-day academic, and especially Anglican, Christianity utterly ignores it. Many of our leading Christian writers and thinkers show no cognisance of all this side of Christian history; from their works it might be imagined that the industrial north had never existed. Close individual contacts between parson and flock, especially at special occasions like weddings and funerals, may go with a complete ignorance of the real interests and concerns of working-class folk and, above all, of the institutions which they have created.

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF WORKING CLASS NONCONFORMITY

The type of culture with which I am concerned was to be seen at its purest in the closely knit manufacturing and mining villages, where working folk built up their own institutions—chapel, trade union, co-operative stores. The same people were leaders in each, and practical social experience, ethical standards and moral drive

passed readily from one to the other. It is not at all the same thing as bourgeois (or petty bourgeois) culture, although both have been linked with nonconformity. And although it is most distinctive in the isolated industrial villages, it is recognisable in all the older industrial districts.

This life was in some matters circumscribed. Many factors were dependent on employers, house property owners or governments, organs in which working folk had no share. It has been woefully lacking in certain types of artistic sense; it has been sundered from the educational and aesthetic traditions of Anglicanism and the older universities. But it has been a scene of real achievement in social organisation and method. The co-operative movement was cradled in industrial Lancashire and developed almost entirely under direction and by the efforts of working men and women. The labour party, trade unions in their British form, and a great part of British democratic thought and effort have come from working class nonconformity; however much they are divorced from the life of the Churches, now, they still bear upon them the marks of their origin. It is just impossible to understand the British labour movement or co-operative institutions without a knowledge of Methodism—but not so much the Methodism of ecclesiastical debate as the Methodism of the village chapel. The whole ethos of these movements is shot through and through with values drawn from nonconformist congregations.

This situation is rapidly changing. Everywhere the Churches are losing the initiative in working class life. In some parts, active opposition to Christianity among working folk has bitten deeply; yet in most of the older industrial districts the position is one of stagnation rather than opposition. In my own district many trade union leaders are active in church work; very many of the directors and active members of the local co-operative societies are church folk, many of them deacons and lay preachers in their own congregations. The Churches may have lost the initiative but their potential power is still great. The channels are still there but the current is slackening. The causes of this loss of initiative are various. Those lying in the realm of ideas and common to all branches of the Church are already familiar to readers of the Christian News-Letter. But there are other institutional causes of importance. With the passage of time, nonconformity has become "respectable." The middle class nonconformist minister or leading layman is nearly as remote from working class life as most Anglicans. Trade unions and working class organisations have had to use Sunday for many of their activities—regional and national committees, congresses and demonstrations. This fact has led to the hardly veiled hostility of certain sections within the Churches and has been fully exploited by reactionary elements. Finally, the admirably high degree of church organisation in nonconformity, and especially in Methodism, with the heavy share of church work done by the laity, has tended to create a body of church enthusiasts who give all their spare time to church work and have no time for anything else. Those who in contrast see their vocation to lie in secular activity—trade union organisation, or political life—are apt to be viewed as backsliders by the elect even if they keep up church attendance.

We have in this country to-day a vast number of ordinary men and women who have been in the rough and tumble of political and trade union life, and who have drawn their drive and inspiration from the Christian faith, very many of whom are still loyal, if somewhat puzzled, members of their Churches. Their contribution is not that of abstract ratiocination; but their judgements, based on intuition and experience, are often wiser than the logic of the intellectuals. Above all, they have the experience of trying to act collectively, in the tough texture of industrial and political life, in the light of their Christian faith. Here is a rich vein of Christian social experience, yet one which the Churches have used very little in their social and ethical thinking. Here, too, is a body of people of vast potential power in the Church and in the world.

THE RELIGIOUS GENIUS OF THE WORKING CLASSES

We have in Great Britain what is perhaps unique in Christian history—a religious tradition which is native and indigenous to an *industrial* proletariat. To-day, obviously, that religious movement is waning; church attendance is declining, Sunday school classes are falling away and so on. Yet the residual power of the Churches—which means for all practical purposes the nonconformist Churches—in the older industrial districts is still enormous. Church attendance may not be high but in the industrial

townships where life has not been uprooted, folk still belong to one or other congregation. Is this real religious tradition to be taken into the stream of a truly ecumenical Christianity, or is it to be left to fight its own battle by itself, faced by blank ignorance or the veiled contempt of the other religious traditions?

Prejudices of class and churchmanship run deep at this point, and I must risk a one-sided picture in the interests of clarity and brevity. Life in an industrial district has shown me, in some ways against my will, how alien much of the Catholic tradition, and especially the Anglican tradition, is to working class culture. Where an Anglican priest has achieved a vigorous working class parish life, it is impossible to avoid the feeling that it is in spite of, rather than because of, the peculiar content of Anglicanism. I can think of many parishes where there is, in the Anglican Church, a fine use of traditional forms of worship and sound doctrinal presentation of the faith; yet the congregation consists of the least progressive and least intelligent section of the working population. In the nonconformist Churches there is appalling flatness and triviality of worship and weakness of doctrinal presentation, yet the Church still has a vital hold on the more live-minded working men and women of the district—those who are true leaders in working class life. One of the reasons for this difference is that nonconformity understands, and has realised, a vital democracy—indeed in some measure it brought democracy to birth; whereas the attempts to graft democratic organs on to the structure of traditional Anglicanism have been almost pathetic. The great contribution of nonconformity is to be found, not in forms of worship, hardly at all in doctrine (in spite of the substantial contribution of Free Church theologians to classical theology to-day), but in the life of the village chapel, with its spontaneous working class piety and its practical sense of community.

This is surely a point where the ecumenical movement should be bringing together the sundered riches of the two traditions. Yet it is almost completely failing to do so, mainly because the leadership, and above all the clerical leadership, of the Free Churches is now largely middle class. The nonconformist minister is no longer " called by God from among the people " but is a member of a recognised profession, akin to school teaching, attained up the ordinary educational ladder and conferring middle class status. Ecumenical discussion makes contact with the Free Churches through the theological professors and heads of the ministerial hierarchies, so the discussion can go on quite happily without touching the heart of the matter. Excellent work has been done in bringing together the Catholic and the Calvinistic theological traditions, yet there is no ecclesiastical traffic between *working-class* nonconformity and the " Catholic " tradition. A consequence is the remarkably small influence which the ecumenical movement has (in spite of B.B.C. backing) among working folk and in industrial districts.

This is not a plea for " nineteenth century liberalism "; although working class nonconformity is apt to set its theological formulations in liberal terms (a fact not so much the fault of working class church folk as of the college trained ministers!) For it cannot be too strongly emphasised that the great contribution of working folk, on the religious as on the political plane, is to be found in wise experience rather than abstract formulation. Many working class Christians, for all the theological vulnerability of their utterances, show a realism in devotional life, in practical grasp on the essentials of the faith, as well as in political tactics, which leaves the " realistic theologian " standing—in spite of his impeccable theological formulations.

Working class nonconformity has clearly no great contribution to make in terms of liturgy. No one would wish to defend the crudity or triviality of some of its forms—for example, what has been called vaudeville or " hip-hip-hooray " type of service. Yet the piety and reality of the simpler Free Church worship among working folk is a very real thing. To attempt to impose on this live tradition, as do some parsons both of the Anglican and Free Churches, alien and undigested " Catholic " forms is as foolish as it would have been for the Catholic Church to have ignored, in its early days, the natural religious modes of expression of the peoples among which it came. Here obviously, is fruitful ground for ecumenical intercourse.

The choice has to be made. Either the ecumenical movement must take up the religious genius of working class nonconformity, or it must be content to waste that tradition and build its academic structure of religious ideas, as far as England goes, largely in mid-air, and hope that it may, some day, touch ground.

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